

January 2014 thoughts, from Father Charles:

Fresh starts and good intentions

At work I use, what in traditional language is, a 'day book'. This is a stitched, large note book; each page is applied to a different day and a different client; each full of the client notes from the encounter. Every one of my books is clearly labelled with volume and date period covered; and all have been bought from the same supplier (bar one) for the many years I've been using the system. In work terms I can precisely say where I was, who I was talking with and provide good details of the subjects covered. I can do this now for several decades.

It's a very good practice, not only because it keeps me on track, but also because it can satisfy a legal necessity (though I confess I sometimes deliberately decide not to write). The system has one flaw. This is the quality of my handwriting.

Each fresh book started comes with a declaration of personal intention to maintain the quality of my handwriting and ensure legibility for more than a few days. Book in, book out, I fail.

I doubt I'm alone in this....

My expectation is that this account will resonate with you, not in the keeping of a 'day book', but in the poor execution of such an intention. On the subject of New Year resolutions, a recent study noted that about 88% of resolutions end in failure. But I'm going to turn this into a positive by providing an alternative.

In the first place, it is *not* about making New Year resolutions; especially those resolutions that are driven by guilt – things we're not good at and bad habits.

No. Far better is the opportunity to do an attitude shift and focus on the things we *are* good at – the things we enjoy doing and which carry some sort of positive reward.

Accentuate the positive

You'll remember the song – a 1940's sermon set to music – where the pastor gathers his people together and says (in my words adapting the original):

'Gather round me everybody,
I feel a sermon coming on,
Settle back and listen
while I start reviewing the attitude of doing right.'

The message from the song is not the 'doing right' but the starting point; which is 'attitude'. And we're reminded of this frequently in scripture and in liturgy. In

Isaiah we read “*go out in joy and be led forth in peace.*” And, at the end of Mass “*Go in peace to love and serve the Lord*”.

I think that if we get the ‘attitude’ bit right then the focus of our actions, where we apply the energy of what we are good at, becomes clearer. As I write this during the octave of Christmas, during which we celebrate the birth of Jesus – Word made Flesh, in the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecy – the season makes the measure of *attitude* very clear to us. So, if the starting point is attitude, then to see what it means, we need to look to the person of Jesus.

“Do not merely look for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 2:4-5.

Joy to the maximum and gloom to the minimum

So, if I was going to sum this up it would be in saying:

- Let’s not burden ourselves with resolutions that will not be sustained
- Instead, recognise what we’re good at, where our many and various gifts lie
- And then apply these to positive effect, for the benefit of others
- Remember that the measure for ‘doing right’ is partly in ourselves, but specifically in the person of Christ Jesus.

With every blessing



WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

“Who do you think you are?” I wonder what comes to mind if that question is asked of you. Do you immediately think of the various roles and relationships in life which define you – parent, son, daughter, aunt, uncle, provider, your occupation, your hobbies and interests? Or does it bring to mind the TV programme where various celebrities are taken on a journey to discover more about their ancestors? Were you, (are you perhaps still), a rather mouthy child like I was (and still am), and had it said to you when you got a bit above yourself. As I remember, it was then usually prefaced by the word “just” – “Just **who** do you think you **are**, young lady?!”

For us as Christians it is a profound question which we might particularly ask of ourselves this month on 12th, when we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. Jesus presents himself to John, at the start of his public ministry, to be baptised

in the river Jordan. He is being immersed in more senses than one - not just in water, but in the story of humanity whom he has come to redeem, and that of course includes every one of us. From that moment the great story moves on in myriad ways, and we are all active participants. A defining moment which should have us pondering for the rest of our lives who we are and what we're here for. There are moments for each of us in the gospel narratives, aren't there, that are extra special - times and places where we might wish we could have been there when it all happened in history. I'd have to put this moment near the top of my list. To be one of those baptised alongside Jesus, to witness this extraordinary incident of the Messiah, God's chosen one, being washed and purifying the waters for us, to watch him pray, then to have that intense awesome experience of the manifestation of the Trinitarian God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit Well, it's to die for, isn't it, quite literally, but it's a death that only baptised Christians can understand. And as we might remind ourselves, the way in which we experience those gospel moments in *our* lives is every bit as real as it was for the people there 2000 years ago.

Two friends of ours, both men in their sixties, were each adopted as babies – not at all unusual at the time they were born in the post war years. One of them, soon after his 60th birthday, managed not only to find out who his mother was, but discovered to his delight that she was still alive and living not too far away from him. He described the experience of finding and meeting her as being like a very heavy mantle lifted from his shoulders. He felt he could relax as so many other aspects of his life fell into place; so many questions could now be answered. The other man is still searching for his natural parents. He thinks they have probably died by now, but he wants to know more about them. I once said to him “It's a pity you aren't famous enough to do 'Who do you think you are' and get all those researchers on your case free of charge”. “Well, that's just it”, he responded wistfully, “I have no idea who I am”. I am sure you have some sympathy with him; we certainly do. Ancestry *is* important. It certainly has been to the Jews down the ages, with exile and genocide in their history.

The genealogies of Jesus and the accounts of his baptism together give us an idea where he is coming from, who he is, and where he is going. Finding out about our forebears does give us a sense of identity, of belonging. And yet we have to consider that in the light of what Our Lord teaches us. Let's turn our attention to two passages in Luke's gospel. The first is from chapter 8, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'. The second is in chapter 9, 'For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.' Genealogy may be important, yes, but Our Lord makes clear that who we are by baptism is much *more* important. The baptism he shares with us and we with him - taking the plunge, literally and metaphorically, with him and being the people of God alongside him in his family. That's much more than seeing him as just one lifestyle guru among many from which we can pick and choose, as the prophets of this world would have us believe. It's also much more than what TV programmes of the finding-out-who-I-really-am variety can offer. It's about not only who *I am* but who *we are* together as God's family, the Church.

The sacrament of baptism – the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace - is the beginning of the Christian life, where grace is poured out to enable us to live as this person in that fellowship. That is how we can be a true worshipping community, intent on working for God's kingdom in the world. What's needed for such fellowship to grow is encouragement of one another, building up one another's faith, praying with and for each other, learning from and teaching each other, setting good examples. And it all starts with baptism. Those baptism waters which Jesus made holy by asking to be immersed in them himself, those waters through which we pass from death to life with him and in him, those waters which wash away our sins and give us a fresh start. Every time someone new is baptised we can recall that fresh start into the present, just as we can every time we turn to God to repent and resolve to live closer to him.

So - who do **you** think you are? Who do you, singular, and you, plural, think you are? We are all washed sinners, greatly beloved of God, called by name to be his children and walk in his light. You are someone, whether you know anything about your forebears or not, to whom God's love gives purpose to your existence. His word gives us a language, a home and a community. You have a great future, whoever you are. Happy New Year and happy renewed you!

Jessica Smith, Parish Lay Minister

RICHARD ROLLE 14TH CENTURY ENGLISH MYSTIC

On 20 January the Church will be commemorating Richard Rolle, a 14thC English mystic. He was a hermit, a spiritual writer and a biblical scholar/translator. He was born around 1300 into a farming family near Pickering in north Yorkshire. He studied at Oxford University where he learnt Latin and studied the scriptures

At 18, afraid as he put it of 'giving into temptation' he became a hermit and had a cell first in Pickering, then in the parish of Ainderby

Richard Rolle was often misunderstood by others, and so had to change accommodation frequently. Bishops and monks found him difficult, the laity were cautious of him and he had difficulty approaching women. Though he did have a woman friend, his disciple Margaret of Kirkby who later became a recluse. After two years of being a hermit he had his first mystical experience and said of it:

'I felt within me a merry and unknown heat I was expert it was not from a creature but from my maker, as it grew hotter and more glad.'

Richard Rolle was the earliest of the 14thC English mystics and we still possess a number of his manuscripts, which leads us to believe that he was probably the most prolific and popular spiritual writer of his time. He is sometimes known as the father of English mysticism. Amongst his writings is

the Latin *Incendium Amori*, which was later translated into English as *The Fire of Love*. In his introduction to *The Fire of Love* he says:
I offer this book for the attention not of the philosophers and sages of this world, not of theologians bogged down in their interminable questionings, but of the simple and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge.

In all his writings his main theme is the loving contemplation of God, which is linked to a passionate devotion to Christ and to the holy name of Jesus, on which one should ponder day and night. His writings are full of erotic imagery in his love for Christ. This highest rapture of God – this love scorns all pleasures of the flesh.

His mysticism is firmly rooted in the humanity of Christ and he writes of the power of his own mystical experiences. His description of these are of heat or fire, song or sweetness. He praises the love of God to the exclusion of all else. He speaks of an incident when he was meditating in a chapel and he suddenly had an intensive experience of heat and burning that he said was so real 'as if it were being done by physical fire as when a finger is placed in the fire'.

He describes three stages of love and union:

- The first stage is of heat and burning, the stage of fire.
- The second stage is of great joy in spirit brought about by heavenly song and intoxication.
- And the third stage is of great sweetness which he compares to divine drunkenness.

These are the three stages of rapture and ecstasy. This rapture is not only out of the senses, but it is 'rapture of the mind into God when the human spirit is lifted up into God in contemplation and sees the door of heaven swing back to reveal the face of the Beloved'. He longs for Jesus, his Beloved, it is a solitary progress apart from human friendship and he writes a long meditation on the orderly progress of coming to the fire of love.

He does talk of human friendships, and he is rude about women reminding me of some of the writings of Tertullian and Jerome on women. However, he says that we need friendships:

I can except no one from true friendship however holy he may be, because he needs it ... unless there perhaps is one to whom angels minister and not men.

He says that

If we are true loves of our Lord Jesus Christ we can certainly think of him while, for example, we are travelling, and retain our song of love when we are in company: we can keep him in mind at meals even when we are enjoying food and drink.

Well, not many people are able to be in the position to take their meditation to the lengths that Richard Rolle did. We have jobs to do, homes to run, families to look after. But if we take time out as often as possible and meditate on Jesus and his life, we can be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit to go out into the world and to work towards Justice and Peace.

Jesus receive my heart, and bring me to thy love: all my desire thou art, and thy coming I covet... Thou art he whom I have sought, when shall I see thy face? (Richard Rolle).

Liz Badman Reader(Licensed Lay Minister)

All Saints Parish Retreat 2014

**“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2
Corinthians 6. 2)**

Exploring the present moment

This year our Parish Retreat is the weekend of 7 – 9 February 2014 at Abbey House, Glastonbury.

Those of you who have been on our retreats before will be able to extol the virtues of Abbey House to others and encourage them to join us in February. Abbey House is a large, elegant early 19th century house set in beautiful gardens overlooking the Abbey ruins. It is peaceful, comfortable, warm, and the food is excellent and there is a bar – all to ensure 48 hours of spirituality and ‘winding down’ from the stresses of our everyday life. We gather together for Morning and Evening Prayer each day, but if you oversleep and don’t appear, that is OK. The delights of Glastonbury with its interesting High Street and the beauties of the countryside are an additional attraction. Many of us take advantage of a weekend in the country to intersperse our spiritual activities with fresh air – and there is always the Tor to climb.

Our Retreat Conductor this year is Revd Canon Wendy Wilby, whom some of you will have known as Precentor at Bristol Cathedral. Canon Wendy has now retired with her husband Philip to Yorkshire and they are living in a windmill. She is deeply spiritual leader and I feel assured that we will come away refreshed and renewed.

This year the cost of the Retreat will be £136 each. There have been changes at the Retreat House and the Trustees have put the cost up, but as a Church Group we still get a good discount. We also invite you to contribute between £2.50 and £3 towards a card and £50 book token for the Retreat Conductor.

Please think hard about this opportunity and sign up in the porch, soon as there is interest from other churches. You will not regret it. Where else would you find 48 hours full board in such glorious surroundings for such a low cost? Perhaps you could bring a friend along as well.

We will have to ask for a non-returnable deposit of £30 to book a place, the remainder to be paid on arrival at Abbey House. Please make deposit cheques out to All Saints with St John, and hand them into to me, Liz Badman, or to Norman Drewett in an envelope marked ‘Retreat Deposit’.

Please sign list in porch. .

For further details please contact Liz Badman at All Saints, Clifton on 0117-9741355 or allsaintsclifton@tiscali.co.uk

Liz Badman
Parish Administrator

HELPING AT ST JOHN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL

It is a source of some pride to have a church school in our parish, and one that provides such an excellent education for the children in its care. All Saints has always provided active school governors, plus one or two clergy or lay who lead Collective Worship. Another way to be involved is to give assistance in the classroom or give time to give individual children help with reading. Both of these are very rewarding activities for anyone who has a couple of hours a week to spare. The school can provide training if needed.

If you think this might interest you then do please let me know.

Jessica Smith

Letter from the Dean of Bristol January 2014

2014 is the Chinese Year of the Horse. It is the European Year of the Brain, the UN Year of both family farming and crystallography. Latvia will become the eighteenth Eurozone country, the Winter Olympics will be held in Sochi, in Russia and, at the very end of the year, US and UK troops will leave Afghanistan. It is the last of those statements that gives you pause for thought. Wars used to end with a surrender, or a peace treaty, but now we are not quite sure if this is a war or not and we are struggling for the words to describe what we are doing. The Ministry of Defence talks about 'drawdown' and a 'security transition'. President Obama, who has suggested that this is indeed a 'war', recently spoke about bringing that war to a 'responsible end'. There is a new vocabulary being used and it leaves some question begging. What does 'drawdown' mean when all the indications are that some NATO troops will remain in Afghanistan? How can we judge whether we have made a responsible end and when does that judgement get made – the day after the troops leave, six months after that?

The real difficulty lies in the idea of a 'security transition'. The phrase suggests something a bit like changing the locks, or employing a different bouncer on the door. The question in Afghanistan is more complicated than that. Exactly who, or what, is it that we are making secure, our bases and troops, the Afghanistan government, the Afghan people? We have watched in horror as the coffins have come home from this war that is not quite a war. At the time of writing, there just under 450 UK troops have been killed. We know that is a grievous loss and we

recite the names at war memorials and on the news. We pay less attention to the fact that civilian deaths in Afghanistan have numbered more than 2,000 a year over the last five years. Amnesty International has been asking the US and UK governments what 'security' there is for the people of the country in this 'transition'.

The situation in Afghanistan is staggeringly complex; politicians have hard decisions to make and our armed forces test ideas of service, daily, in extreme conditions. In a few words, in an article like this, there is no sudden wisdom to offer. There is, instead, a question about the scope and scale of our ambition. We use words like 'drawdown' and 'security transition' deliberately; we use them because it is too difficult to talk about peace. When did political reality strangle our hope? We must not allow plans for 'drawdown' to hedge our ambition and put limits on what we think we can achieve. If our politicians want to honour the memory of Mandela they should look to the work that must follow the end of hostilities and they must dare to dream.

Just a few days ago, at Christmas, we celebrated the fact that angels sang about peace, over Bethlehem. Their song was much more political than we usually acknowledge, for they sang over the Roman Empire in the days of the *pax augusta* – the peace of the Emperor Augustus. Roman armies had secured the borders, Roman swords and spears kept enemies in check and they called that *peace*. It is an old error and the angels rose in protest. Peace is not the presence or absence of an army. Peace is reconciliation and trust. The peace of God, lying in the manger in Bethlehem, is unarmed and has only the resources of love, grace and forgiveness to offer. In 2014 if we have any more resolutions we can make, we could do worse than to choose our words carefully and to hope for more.

The Very Reverend David Hoyle